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ABSTRACT

The particular migrational and acculturative stresses and psychosocial experiences of Latino families seem to converge to create unique conditions for suicide attempts by adolescent Latinas. Adolescent Latinas may internalize the ambivalence their mothers experience about the directions taken in their own lives. Suicide attempts in adolescent Latinas can be understood as desperate efforts at connection with their mothers, attempts to integrate the contradictory horns of their dilemma. Unfortunately what often follows a suicide attempt by a Latina is an intensified but unhealthy connection with her mother, coupled with continued disruptiveness in the relationship. Engaging adolescent Latinas attempters and their mothers in psychotherapy requires careful attention to the sociocultural, developmental, and relational variables which have impinged on their lives, leading to suicidal behavior. Early in treatment it is often useful to assist both mother and daughter in identifying and clarifying the dilemma in their own terms to reframe the suicide attempt in terms of its ontological and acculturational components. A second restorative, integrative technique is to have the adolescent Latina and her mother describe their experience of the suicide attempt and events surrounding it. The intent of these interventions is to foster the ability of adolescent Latinas and their mothers to renegotiate their relationship so that mutual understanding and empathy are restored and enhanced. (ABL)

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SUICIDAL ADOLESCENT LATINAS: A TREATMENT PERSPECTIVE

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Suicidal Adolescent Latinas: A Treatment Perspective

In this paper, I will present a way of understanding suicidal behavior in adolescent Latinas. In order to offer a context in which this understanding can be couched, I will provide initially a very brief outline of some acculturational and migrational issues which have an impact upon the development of suicidality in this population. Following this, I will touch upon several aspects of recent theories of female adolescent development. The body of the paper will then focus attention upon a model of the etiology of suicidality in adolescent Latinas which takes into account these acculturational and developmental issues. Finally, I will present some technical approaches to psychotherapeutic treatment.

Acculturational/Migrational Issues

Although many risk factors and precipitants of suicidality are evident in other ethnic and racial minority groups, the particular migrational and acculturative stresses and psychosocial experiences of Latino families seem to converge to create unique conditions for suicide attempts by adolescent Latinas. In particular, the following issues appear to have an impact upon suicidal behavior: 1) The level of adherence in the family to traditional child-rearing practices, especially in female role socialization; 2) discrepancies in the level of acculturation between the adolescent and her family; and 3) parental attitudes toward their daughter's assimilation of American values and behaviors, especially regarding sexuality. When a family is more traditional, less acculturated, and less open to assimilation of

American values, the adolescent Latina is more likely to be faced with conflicts which appear unresolvable. I will suggest that these conditions can be suicidogenic for her.

In addition, I maintain that much of the struggle surrounding these conflicts will manifest in difficulties between Latina mother and daughter. To some extent, these difficulties are idiosyncratic to this population as a consequence of the cultural factors outlined above. However, although characteristic patterns can be detected which derive from these cultural factors, the vicissitudes of the mother/daughter relationship are also consonant in some ways with theories of female adolescent development, to which I now turn.

Female Adolescent Development

In the earlier part of this century, largely influenced by psychoanalytic conceptualizations, female adolescent development was subsumed under that of males. Freud (1931,1933), Erikson (1968), and Blos (1962, 1979), among others, made the assumption that girls, like boys, struggled in adolescence with the task of separating and individuating from their families of origin, casting off the definitions of self that had been formed in the context of their relationships with their parents. From this point of view, "storm and stress" in adolescence were expressive of the age-appropriate need to stand apart from the family and develop one's own identity (Blos, 1962, 1979). In fact, Erikson (1950, 1968) maintained that true intimacy and empathy could only develop once this separation was accomplished.

More recent writings, such as those of Carol Gilligan and her colleagues at Harvard University (e.g., Gilligan, 1982, 1989; Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer, 1989; Gilligan, Brown, and Rogers, 1990) and of Jean Baker Miller and her associates at the Stone Center at Wellesley College (e.g, Miller, 1976; Jordan et al, 1991), take a strongly opposing view, at least with regard to the development of females in adolescence. Miller (1976, 1991) and others have made the idea of "self-in-relation" central to conceptualizations about female adolescent development. In brief, "self-in-relation" refers to the idea that "the primary experience of self is relational, that is, the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships" (Surrey, 1991, p. 52). Surrey maintains that basic elements of the "core self" in women include interest in and attention to others, forming the basis for emotional connection and empathy; a sharing of experience which leads to a heightened development of self and other; and growth of empowerment and self-knowledge through mutual sensitivity and responsibility (Surrey, 1991).

The task of girls in adolescence, then, is more to renegotiate the relationship with their mothers through mutual sensitivity and empathy than it is to break free of maternal bonds. In fact, the struggles of adolescence are thought of as motivated by a desire to maintain and reshape channels of communication and empathy with the mother, such that reciprocity and mutual connection are supported and deepened (Surrey, 1991; Kaplan and Klein, 1991; Miller, 1976). Included in this struggle is the need in the

daughter to make her mother see her for who she is, not for who the mother has thought she was or has wanted her to be (Apter, 1990). There exists, then, a powerful propulsion toward greater authenticity in the relationship, toward increased intimacy and sharing. Further, mother/daughter conflict in adolescence is seen as "one mode of intense and abiding engagement" and "essential for the changes that must be made so that the relationship and each person in it can change and grow" (Kaplan, Gleason, and Klein, 1991, p. 125). Clearly, this stands in stark contrast to the thinking of Erikson (1950,1968), who maintained that the issue of intimacy does not become ascendant until after identity is fully formed, and Blos (1962, 1979), who believed that the storms of adolescence were motivated by a need to break away, to separate from the family.

Gilligan and her colleagues, focussing on the development of morality in females, maintain that a girl's sense of morality is contextually-framed, such that girls will take into consideration the feelings and needs of all those involved in a given circumstance in arriving at a moral conclusion. Their decisions will be strongly influenced by relationships and empathic connections with others. By contrast, boys are more likely to make moral decisions on the basis of a more "legalistic" point of view; their choices are more likely to be founded upon what is "right" according to the impersonal moral principles involved, and the context of relationships and needs will less often become a guiding factor for them.

Clearly, the above ways of thinking about female development suggest that girls are likely to be strongly and empathically connected to the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs of their mothers, and that they will search within their mothers' experience for guidelines for the development of their own "self-in-relation". One implication, then, is that when a mother's point of view clashes directly with that of her daughter, creating the experience in both of them of a rupture of connection, a dislocation of empathy, dire circumstances can ensue. I suggest, in fact, that just such disruptions, further potentiated by discrepancies in acculturational experience, are central to the conditions under which suicidality arises in adolescent Latinas.

Dynamics of the Mother/Daughter Relationship

According to Gilligan and her colleagues (Gilligan, 1982, 1989; Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer, 1989), prepubertal girls are normatively in contact with their "voice"--that is, their unique expression of their self and their perspective. However, at some time between approximately the ages of 11 and 15, this sense of connectedness dissipates, such that girls in mid-adolescence appear more confused, less sure of themselves. It is suggested that "voice" submerges, goes "underground", in the face of direct contact and conflict with the attitudes of the male-dominated larger society in which girls develop. In essence, girls struggle with a sense of who they are in relation to who they are "supposed to be" as nascent women.

This struggle has particular overtones in the developmental

experience of many adolescent Latinas, and these unique features are often played out in the relationship with their mothers. Because Latinas from immigrant families struggle not only with their understanding of themselves in relation to the larger, male-dominated American society, but also in relation to the culture of the island from which their family emigrated, they are confronted with issues at adolescence that are often more complex than those of girls in families which have existed within one cultural context for a longer period of time.

Typically, the adolescent Latinas I have seen in treatment complain of restrictions by their mothers, of feeling that their mothers are of the "old culture", maintaining attitudes about adolescent girls that are inappropriate to the American culture in which the girls themselves feel more at home. These mothers are also seen by their daughters as supporting a traditional position in women characterized by interpersonal connectedness, responsibility, and nurturance, comparable to the "care" voice described by Gilligan (Gilligan, 1982). However, the Latina mothers appear to emphasize the aspect of care referred to by Gilligan, Brown, and Rogers (1990) as "bad care"; that is, a focus on the needs of others and the provision of these needs, regardless of the cost to the self.

Despite the fact that it may appear otherwise, the mothers' desires for their daughters are not so simple. Although they seem to support a view of women which includes selfless (even self-destructive) care for others, passivity, obedience, and sexual

chastity, there is another aspect to the image they project to their daughters as well; specifically, the mothers also wish that their daughters will succeed where they did not. The adolescent Latinas are thus encouraged, although in subtly ambivalent ways, to fulfill their potential by avoiding early pregnancy, going to college, and so on; in short, by living out the dream their mothers did not dare believe could come true for themselves.

In essence, then, the mothers' contradictory messages pose the nexus of an apparently "insolvable problem" (Orbach, 1986, 1988) for their daughters. Perhaps because of the sensitivity of the adolescent Latina, her attunement to her mother through empathy and identification, she internalizes the ambivalence her mother experiences about the direction taken in her own life. Mother and daughter each grapple with the contradiction between being passive and compliant on the one hand and fulfilling one's own unique potential on the other, between going beyond one's mother and simultaneously staying in relationship with her.

A struggle, based on the ambivalence which is in fact within both mother and daughter, thus ensues in the interpersonal space between them. The clash between separation and connectedness (Stern, 1989) is now externalized: For the girls, to feel connected to their mothers means a loss of connectedness to their unique voice, their sense of self, while to separate is to maintain contact with their pristine uniqueness but to risk losing connectedness with their family and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, the complexity of this dilemma and the risks

involved feel overwhelming to the adolescent Latinas, and the potential for genuine tragedy--loss inherent in each and every choice--becomes palpably apparent. They identify with both images that their mothers, in their own ambivalence, are trying to instill--the passive, obedient, culturally traditional path on the one hand, and the independent, success-oriented one adapted to American culture on the other--and can find no way to integrate the two. These circumstances can lead to "desperate actions, desperate efforts at connection" (Gilligan, 1989, p. 9). In fact, suicide attempts in adolescent Latinas can be understood as just such desperate efforts at connection to their mothers, attempts to integrate the contradictory horns of their dilemma.

Moreover, the mothers of the Latinas are often unable to tolerate maintaining connection with their daughters in this struggle, leading the girls to feel "the loss of confirmation of their core self-structure as one that can facilitate reciprocity and affective connection in relationships" (Kaplan, 1991, p. 211). Preceding a suicide attempt by a Latina, her mother has often come to a point where she regards her daughter as "bad" because she has taken on American values which contradict those of the traditional culture from whence the family came. The adolescent Latina then experiences what Kaplan (1991) refers to as a "sustained state of profound disconnection from a parent who is affectively not available to her, or who responds to her impulses and attempts at contact with disdain, ridicule, or outright hostility" (p. 212). Further, "such experiences...can generate...a pervasive sense of

her utter inability to sustain relationship or please the other, which is tantamount to a major disconfirmation of her core sense of self-worth" (Kaplan, 1991, p. 212).

Immediately preceding an attempted suicide, then, there is a shift in the ability of Latinas to withstand the pain of the struggle between maintaining contact with their voices and maintaining connection with their mothers through a traditional passive female stance. The suicide attempt can be understood as a confused, "desperate effort" to solve this dilemma, to reduce the tension between the potential for loss of nurturance from the mother and the potential loss of nurturance of the self. In the suicidal state, Latinas punish their own voices, which feel unacceptable, unheard, and worthy of extinction. They perceive, wrongly, that their mothers only support traditional perspectives, unable to see or feel their mothers' own dilemmas and ambivalence. Confused and alone, they try to reconnect with their mothers by joining them in an act of punishment: The attempt on their own lives is an attempt at reconnection, at re-establishing a sense of "self-in-relation", at resolution of the "insolvable problem" at all costs.

Seen from this perspective, the central need expressed in a suicide attempt by an adolescent Latina is to integrate her unique voice with connectedness with her mother, to re-establish a mutuality of responsiveness and empathy. The girl desires to elicit her mother's help and support in facing the demands of both American and Latino cultures and of development into adulthood.

In a way, the suicidal behavior is a plea for companionship.

Unfortunately, what often follows a suicide attempt by a Latina is an intensified but unhealthy connection with her mother, coupled with continued disruptiveness in the relationship. In many cases, the girl feels a connectedness with her mother through her mother's expressions of anger; she then feels that her mother is overly intrusive, "breathing down her neck". Although the mother feels increased concern, she also feels increasingly controlled by her daughter, and resents what she perceives as manipulation. She feels she must "walk on eggshells", giving her daughter what appears to be more autonomy; however, this "autonomy" is given at great cost to any sense of mutual reciprocity and empathy. Both mother and daughter continue to feel misunderstood, disconnected, controlled, and angry. Ironically, both feel connected in a disconnected way--through anger, intrusion, and perceived exploitation--experiencing this circumstance as unfair. This, then, is often the state of the relationship when psychotherapy is initiated.

Treatment

Engaging adolescent Latina suicide attempters and their mothers in psychotherapy requires careful attention to the sociocultural, developmental, and relational variables which have impinged upon their lives, leading to suicidal behavior. One essential feature of such treatment is to assist both mother and daughter in regaining a sense of empathic connection, mutual concern, and reciprocity through delineating the dilemma faced by

the adolescent and framing it in terms of her ontological development into female adulthood in the context of bicultural experience. In order to accomplish this objective, I suggest the following techniques, among others: 1) Delineating the dilemma; 2) promoting authorship of and listening to narrative (Tappan and Brown, 1989); and 3) reorienting to "good care" and "good justice" (Gilligan, Brown, and Rogers, 1990).

Early in treatment, it is often useful to assist both mother and daughter in identifying and clarifying the dilemma in their own terms. The intent of this intervention is to reframe the suicide attempt in terms of its ontological and acculturational components, removing the interplay of blame and guilt that is so often consequent to it. Elsewhere, I have described how a Latina can articulate under these circumstances "the pain of trying to establish and maintain her sense of self in the face of an intense need to feel her mother's presence and potential for nurturance", and to help her mother understand that "her more 'American' ways of behaving were not intended to be hurtful or rejecting, but were necessary for her ability to evolve in her own uniqueness" (Zimmerman, 1991, p. 237). Delineating the dilemma can help both the adolescent Latina and her mother understand the girl's need for a connected separateness, a reciprocity founded upon mutuality, so that the "voice" of the adolescent may survive while not damaging her mother and incurring retributive anger and rejection.

Often, delineating the dilemma can also attenuate the intensity of the "'dance' of intrusion, exploitation and mistrust"

(Zimmerman, 1991, p. 237) which is so common following a suicide attempt by an adolescent Latina. Assisting the adolescent in articulating her experience gives her mother the opportunity to understand that she (the daughter) is not behaving as she is out of disrespect or the intent to cause upset. It also allows the adolescent to make clear to her mother that she needs to be trusted to manage her own life, while conveying simultaneously how important it is that they share open communication with one another. The wish to renegotiate the relationship in order to facilitate mutual sharing and evolving can be expressed in a way that is not experienced as destructive.

A second restorative, integrating therapeutic technique is to have both the adolescent Latina and her mother describe, in narrative form, their experience of the suicide attempt and events surrounding it. Although some clinicians may feel that to do so is to excavate disturbing memories that should be left interred, my experience has been otherwise. I believe that having mother and daughter "translate knowing into telling" (Tappan and Brown, 1989, p. 185), both for themselves and for the other, can provide an opportunity for empathic entry to the other's experience of the events, often leading to a profound experience of reconnection between them. The experience of "narrating" can strengthen the mother's understanding that her daughter was not acting only from manipulative motives, and can rebuild the sense of trust that the daughter will not repeat such an action, so that reciprocity and mutual empathy are restored. For the daughter, this experience can

help her reconnect with her mother's genuine love, care, and concern for her, since the mother's narrative inevitably brings her back in touch with the pain of seeing her daughter in such dire circumstances. The therapist's clinical acumen in this regard must be focussed upon assisting both parties in articulating not only the sequence of events as they experienced them, but also the moments when feelings of empathy and reconnection occurred. In essence, it is "through telling [that] an individual owns experience, understands it, comes to terms with it. The process of narrating becomes a crucial restorative, reintegrative function for both mother and daughter after a girl's suicide attempt" (Zimmerman, 1991, p. 238).

In the process of delineating the dilemma and authoring the narrative of the suicide attempt, adolescent Latinas and their mothers can discover a more positive mutuality of concern and reciprocity. Intrusion and exploitation--manifestations of "bad care" (Brown, 1988; Gilligan, 1989; Gilligan, Brown, and Rogers, 1990)--can be replaced by understanding and empathy; inequality and unfairness--manifestations of "bad justice"--can be reoriented toward mutuality of respect. In this regard, movement in psychotherapy can be enhanced through the clinician's attentiveness to the issues of justice and care, and the ability to reframe attitudes which appear intrusive, exploitative, or unfair in terms of the genuine concern and mutual attunement which so often underlie them.

Ultimately, then, the intent of the interventions described

here is to foster the ability of adolescent Latinas and their mothers to renegotiate their relationship so that mutual understanding and empathy are restored and enhanced. It is hoped that a relationship will evolve which tolerates the daughter's movement into American culture and adulthood without a loss of connectedness to the cultural matrix into which she was born, and which can be nurturant to mother and daughter alike while providing enough individuation to experience companionship without enmeshment. Thus, through deepened awareness and understanding of the cultural, developmental, and relational factors which impinge upon them, the adolescent Latina and her mother can gain both greater mutual respect and self-understanding.

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